

## NO ESCAPE

Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལག་།

Lha mo was a Tibetan herdsman of thirty, mother of two children, and a filial daughter. Nevertheless, she rejected persuasion from her mother, Bde skyid, and others who were kind to her, to divorce her irresponsible, cruel husband. No one understood why Lha mo refused to divorce her heartless husband until a government clerk met Lha mo.

Lha mo was born into a rich family with, seemingly, a good future. She enjoyed a happy childhood with her humorous, affable father and thought she was the luckiest girl in the world.

Time passed.

One overcast winter day, three men with rifles across their backs rode to Lha mo's family's tent. Lha mo noticed bloodstains on their boots and sheepskin robes when they neared the family tent, leading another horse that carried a something large wrapped in black fabric. Blood trickled down the horse's belly.

Bde skyid came out of the tent when their family's watchdog began barking furiously. She assumed it was her husband, who had gone to join a battle over grassland a few days earlier. Bde skyid fainted when she realized her husband was not among the three riders, and his horse was carrying his corpse.

The next day, Lha mo stared at her father's corpse wrapped in white cloth and placed on the right side of the tent. She pointed and asked, "Mother, what's that?"

No answer.

Lha mo wondered why her mother did not respond, and why tears ran down her cheeks. She went near the corpse and reached out to touch it, but her mother quickly took Lha mo in her arms and went out of the tent.

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Later, Lha mo dropped out of junior high school to marry Bkra shis. Lha mo was her mother's only, beloved child, and did not oppose her decision.

Bkra shis got up early every morning and drove the family's yaks out to graze after breakfast.

One hot summer day, Lha mo and her mother washed their hair and clothes in a stream. A neighbor woman came and joined them. After they finished washing their hair, they began chatting. The neighbor asked, "Where's Bka shis?"

"He's herding," Bde skyid said proudly.

"Is he kind to you?" asked the neighbor.

"Yes, he is very kind to me and Lha mo. He takes care of us," said Bde skyid. "He never asks us to herd the yaks."

The neighbor paused for a second and said, "I heard he is unfilial, a gambler, and that his family expelled him from their home."

Bde skyid was startled and said, "No! He's a good person and never gambles. Maybe you confused him with someone else."

Lha mo's face turned red when she heard this. She pretended she had heard nothing and continued washing clothes.

Bde skyid interrupted their conversation when she saw Bkra shis descending a nearby mountain to come home for lunch and ran to the tent without saying goodbye to the neighbor. The neighbor gazed at Bde skyid's back as she was entering the tent. A bit later, smoke swirled into the air from the black yak-hair tent.

Five years later, Lha mo had a son and a daughter. Lha mo loved and spoiled them, but they resented her, which made her unhappy.

One night, Lha mo noticed one yak was missing. She entered the tent and scolded Bkra shis, who was having a bowl of beef noodles, "A yak is missing. You didn't herd the yaks very well recently. Go find it!"

The boy said to Lha mo, "Father needs to rest. He's hungry and has to eat supper."

The girl added, "He's right. You never herd yaks! You should search for the missing yak."

Bkra shis put the bowl of noodles down and headed to the tent door. His son grabbed his sleeve and said, "Father, it's getting dark. Wolves will attack you! Don't go look for the yak."

Bkra shis kissed the boy's forehead and said, "It's okay. Your father is a big man. Wolves are afraid of me!"

The daughter was holding a bowl of noodles and standing next to her brother. Her father did not kiss her, so she dropped her bowl of noodles down, gripped the lower part of her father's sheepskin robe, and wailed, "Father, don't go! If I lose my father... if wolves eat you, I won't have a father!"

Bkra shis held her in his arms, kissed her several times, and said, "You know your father is brave and not afraid of wolves. I'll kill the wolves if they attack me!"

His children were still unconvinced, so he gave them his cell phone and told them to watch movies. They smiled and jumped into the air when he handed over the phone.

A few hours later, the watchdog began barking. Bde skyid asked, "Lha mo, go check. Maybe it's Bkra shis."

Lha mo said, "It's dark. I'm afraid to go outside alone."

Bde skyid told her grandchildren to go out with their mother, but they refused.

"Wolves will eat your mother if you don't go with her," Bde skyid said.

They ignored this and continued watching a cartoon on the cell phone. Lha mo picked up a rope and wanted to beat her children, but paused, and then left the tent, angry at her children for not accompanying her.

September. Locals were busy talking about the price of selling yaks. Some local young people sold yaks, bought new cars, and aimlessly drove their cars back and forth in the community.

Bde skyid agreed with Bkra shis that he could drive their family's twenty yaks to the county town with his peers, who were also selling their families' yaks.

The next day, Lha mo's maternal uncle visited and persuaded Bde skyid privately not to allow Bkra shis to sell the yaks with his peers.

Bde skyid was angry with her brother for believing that Bkra shis would gamble with the money earned from selling the yaks. Unable to change her mind, Bde skyid's brother left.

Lha mo's neighbor slaughtered a yak and gave a chunk of meat to Lha mo's family. Lha mo cut the meat in half and cooked beef noodles. She wrapped the other half in a plastic bag and put it in a pot.

Three days later, Bde skyid smelled something rotten and found the bag of meat. When she saw worms wiggling inside, she told Lha mo to feed the meat to the watchdog.

Lha mo wanted to explain that she had kept it for Bkra shis, who had left home five days earlier. She hesitated and decided not to argue with her mother and walked outside.

A few days later, Lha mo's cousin, Ban lo, drove a motorcycle to the township town and returned home the next day. Lha mo rushed out of the tent when she heard a motorcycle, stopped her cousin near her tent, and asked, "Did you phone Bkra shis?"

Ban lo unwrapped a black scarf covering his mouth and replied, "I called him. He said he was in Shanghai."

"Impossible! He doesn't speak Chinese. He's never been to a Chinese city!" Lha mo exclaimed.

"He was with his friends. Some of them can speak a little Chinese. I talked to a man with Bkra shis. They seemed happy to travel with Bkra shis, who promised to pay for everything," Ban lo confided.

That night over supper, Lha mo kept her head down. Her mother looked at her and said, "It's your fault. He'll spend all the money."

Lha mo kept her head down and said nothing.

"Your deceased father would have introduced you to a good man, but you didn't listen," said Bde skyid.

Lha mo began sobbing.

"Foolish girl! It's too late to cry. Divorce him when he returns!" said Bde skyid.

The next day, Lha mo was herding yaks on a mountain with Mdzes po, who asked, "Is Bkra shis back?"

Lha mo hesitated and replied, "No, he'll return soon, I guess."

"Well, I heard he was in a city. I told you he's not a good person, but you didn't believe me. I'm sure he'll return when he's out of money," Mdzes po lectured.

Lha mo could not believe her husband was in Shanghai, recalling that he had promised to buy her a coral necklace after selling the yaks.

The next gloomy day, Bde skyid was ill in bed, so Lha mo cooked beef soup and used a small spoon to feed her mother. After Bde skyid had a few spoons of soup and slept, tears filled Lha mo's beautiful eyes as she looked at her mother's pale face.

Lha mo poured a bowl of soup for each of her children and tried to have some soup. She had no appetite, so she left the tent to drive the yaks back.

The yaks were scattered in the valley. Dark clouds tumbled in a sky of thunder. She looked at the sky periodically while driving the yaks back home. Suddenly it began raining heavily as lightning flashed and thunder boomed. She was afraid but realizing her children were frightened by thunder and lightning, she walked as fast as she could.

As she crossed a muddy slope, she slipped in the mud, staining her clothes. She was soon completely soaked and water dripped from her robe. She felt cold. Her robe became heavy and she could not walk quickly.

When Lha mo approached the family tent, she saw her son standing at the tent door, crying. Believing something bad had happened, she trotted to the tent, went inside, knelt next to her mother, and called her name.

No answer.

She left the tent, crouched near the tent door, moaned, and clawed the ground. Thunder roared furiously, and lightning lit up the sky. Lha mo ignored these fearful events and continued grieving in the heavy rain.

When locals came to offer condolences, Lha mo was embarrassed when they asked about Bkra shis. Sometimes she thought her mother and relatives were right, and she should divorce. "Maybe life will be better if I live with my children without him," she thought.

Lha mo waited for twenty days. There was no news about Bkra shis. It seemed he had disappeared from her life.

Two months later, the community leader, Bkra lo, came to Lha mo's tent and said that the local government would divide a sum of government money among community members at his home the next day.

Lha mo rode a horse to Bkra lo's home the next morning. Locals chatted near Bkra lo's tent. Lha mo was the only woman who had come to collect the money. She was embarrassed and startled to see Bkra shis.

That night, the children happily sat on Bkra shis' lap, wrapped their arms around his neck, and kissed him. Lha mo looked at them with teary eyes.

The next day, Lha mo milked the yaks and gazed at Bkra shis, who got on his motorcycle and left without any goodbye.

At noon, the township government leader and a female government clerk visited Lha mo. The leader was Chinese and could not speak Tibetan. The clerk was Lha mo's relative.

The clerk asked, "Sister, how much money did your family get this time?"

"My family received 1,376 RMB," replied Lha mo.

The clerk translated what Lha mo said to the leader, who nodded and said nothing.

Lha mo offered milk tea.

The unmarried clerk had rejected many engagements, believing a single woman had freedom. She gave some candy to Lha mo's children, who smiled and ran out of the tent. The clerk watched them. After a while, the clerk chatted with Lha mo outside the tent, and then they left.

That night, the clerk could not sleep, thinking about what Lha mo said, "I know it's better to divorce, but my children love him. They need him."

The clerk rolled over in her bed. She admired Lha mo. "What a great mother. She can endure male domination and is so devoted to her children!" she thought.

She sighed, turned off the lamp on a small table near her bed, and covered her head with a blanket. Still unable to sleep, she recalled Lha mo, asking why she did not marry. She had replied, "I don't want to marry a person who will spend all the money I earn, not be responsible for our family, and who will dominate his wife."

She thought for a long time, but no perfect solution came to her. "Maybe Lha mo is right. Life works its own way, not the way we expect," she decided.

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A sunny morning, five years later, the clerk asked her two sons to dress well, walked to the garage, told the boys to sit in the back to avoid a quarrel over who would ride in front, and started the car.

She drove to Lha mo's home.

#### TIBETAN TERMS

ban lo བན་ལོ།

bde skyid བདེ་སྦྱིད།

bkra lo བཀྲ་ལོ།

bkra shis བཀྲ་ཤིས།

gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལས།

lha mo ལྷ་མོ།

mdzes po མཛེས་པོ།

#### CHINESE TERM

Shanghai 上海